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The Workshop

A Monthly Journal, devoted to Progress of the Useful Arts.

EDITED BY
I. SCHNORR AND OTHERS.

VOL. VII.

N^o. 12.

ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE GOLDSMITH'S ART DURING THE PERIOD OF GERMAN RENAISSANCE

By
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Of all the transformations which the style of Art in the East has undergone in the course of many centuries, there is none which manifests such an abrupt change as that from the Gothic to the Renaissance. All the preceding changes of artistic forms appear in a greater or less degree like gentle transitions from the old paths into new; each of the predominant styles of former times betrays in its nature its derivation from older forms, as may be proved by all the productions of art from the time when it flourished in Western Asia, and even in Hindostan and Egypt, down to the periods of Romanesque and Gothic Architecture, even the two last having, at least as to construction, been developed gradually from what existed before. But, apart from this point of view, which merely considers the exterior form, with respect to their internal sources, all these transformations agree in this, that their ruling and originating ideas had been generated by former ones, developing themselves in a constant progression in each new period, and appearing as the fruit or consequence of the preceding one; thus bringing into general acknowledgement and adoption the new forms in which the new materials were shaped.

The revival of the antique, however, which though attempted several times in the middle ages, did not successfully become a *fait accompli* till the conclusion of the Gothic period, manifested itself at first rather as a retrograde movement, at least in a historical sense. It was at utter variance with every thing that existed in the whole realm of art; it introduced into the life of the present, forms and ideas of times long past if not forgotten, and thus took upon itself a mission never pre-

viously known in the history of art, changing, and that permanently, the artistic efforts, which till then had always been original and creative into merely receptive ones. The transition was not easy; the less so as the essence of the Gothic was in the most direct contrast to the modern-antique style and as the creative element of Mediæval Art still existed even in the worn out grooves of the late Gothic style, and gave evidence of a considerable power of invention, if not of the faculty of prolonging its existence.

Now in the Renaissance style, this original and creative element was necessarily forced into the background; the movement had to become retrograde, and the artistic genius of the time had less to produce anything of itself than to receive from the antique, and merely reproduce it in its own creations.

What then we observe in aftertimes as the free characteristics of Renaissance art, and as variations of the antique models in the characteristics of each nation, as they embody themselves in Italian, French, German, English and Spanish Renaissance, is fundamentally but the final result of the struggle between the contending powers of old and new art. France now built her royal palaces in a strange mixture of Gothic elements, roses, pinnacles and buttresses, with Roman mouldings and high roofs. Spain added to this melange strong reminiscences of the Moorish style, and Germany altered the ancient style which she had accepted to its very essence, conceiving and applying its appearance in a merely picturesque instead of an architectural point of view, to which her artists were naturally led, as the last epoch of her

Gothic art had entirely lost all architectonic consciousness, and had erected a pictorial conception in its place.

For the goldsmith's art in particular, the circumstances were unfavorable. More than all other artistic trades, including cabinet making, it was, during the prevalence of the Gothic, dependent on architecture, in a subservient position, which must be termed a retrogression, when compared with its free and grand development in the Romanesque epoch. It is true that every branch of art had bowed beneath the sceptre of architecture, but none had gone so far in the abandonment of its own peculiar spirit as that of the goldsmith, which both in wrought and cast metal imitated the pointed arches of the cathedral, or rather single architectural fragments of it, and by skilfully combining these with the elementary forms of another style of art, composed its pixes, monstrances, censers and other accessories. But even the clasp of the mantle, or the buckle of a girdle was a mere imitation of a geometrical figure, quatrefoil or trefoil, such as is to be seen on the carvings and stone masonry of a church. The designs of Martin Schongauer and some of his contemporaries prove that in the second half of the fifteenth century, this architectonic spirit prevailed at this time in the goldsmith's art throughout Germany, employing most brilliantly the figures of the Gothic style; but some inventories or catalogues of presents made to princes contain among their items "Heathen flowers", being the ornaments on the heads of cups, pointing out the first adoption of ancient Roman or Italian models.

The goldsmith's art of this period would no doubt have retained its mediæval character much longer, and would not have adapted itself to the new taste till a much later period, if it had not been influenced by external circumstances. It had been, during the whole of the middle ages the special handmaid of the Church; it was now almost entirely deprived of this protector, and this for two reasons; first for an external one, because classical studies, which then began to flourish, and the Reformation gave a heavy blow to the exhibition of ecclesiastical display; and secondly for an internal reason, because the Church, if it now made any use of the goldsmith's work, no longer imparted to it that exclusively ecclesiastical character which it had done in the past. For as the Renaissance in Germany neglected more than all else the erection of Churches, an exclusively ecclesiastical style became wholly out of the question for the goldsmith's art.

By way of indemnification however it found a refuge in the houses of the citizens. From the Altar and Sacristy it removed its headquarters to the reception rooms of the patricians' mansions, choosing as its principal throne the sideboard and festal table. Its character became almost entirely secular and profane, our ancestors of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries making extensive use of it in their ill-famed orgies. As the increase of wealth too was accompanied by a taste for the refinements of life, wealthy citizens were fond of replacing their old pewter vessels by gold and silver plate, even supplying

the place of the still highly prized Venetian glass, which fragile material could not compete with the solid metal in its power of sustaining the violence of the German carousers. Afterwards came washing jugs and basins, christening cups, armour, trinkets, caparisons for horses, loops and clasps for hats, looking glass frames, and still later watchcases, knives and forks, special productions of a trade which had become altogether secular.

But how to devise corresponding forms for this multitude of wants? How was art to comply with the powerfully growing influences of the revived antique? It is not easy to answer this question. We perceive indeed, in some cases, that goldsmiths, as did also architects, attempted at first a purely mechanical union, if we may use the expression, of the Gothic with the antique. There exist, for example, chalices of this period, the contours and construction of which adhere faithfully to the architectonic laws of the Gothic style, but in which buttresses and pinnacles are replaced by loggia-like arches containing little figures *à l'antique* preserving throughout a similar ornamentation. In general, the German Renaissance chalice could never entirely get rid of a reminiscence of its Gothic predecessors either in form or structure, just as the altar, down to the times of the Rococo, never entirely abandoned certain reminiscences of Gothic structure. The cause of this is, doubtless, the absence of any really architectural principle or sentiment, in which the artistic trade of the new epoch in Germany might have found as firm a support, when it renounced its old customs, as did the Renaissance of Italy. This explains also why in Germany, painters generally furnished models for the goldsmiths, while in the South of Europe even in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries it appears that it was more frequently the case that goldsmiths, having a knowledge of architecture, frequently took up the painter's brush, imparting to painting the solid principles of the sister art.

In that country masters in the art of painting often employed pencil and burin in those times in order to furnish designs to different trades; none however was so richly assisted as that of the goldsmith, which was provided with the most exquisite works of Durer and Holbein, Aldegrever, the Beheims, Brosamer, Virgil, Polis, Hopfer &c. In unquestionable connexion with this is the preference of the goldsmiths of these times for the application of engravings to their productions, partly because this is most fitted for imitating the designs of the copper plate, and partly because the pictorial character of these designs was most easily reproduced by such surface decoration. When we consider this together with the want of strictly architectural principles in the whole direction of the art, we cannot be surprised that the ornamentation should necessarily become more and more naturalistic. Those tendrils of ivy and vine which we meet with in designs of Durer, Holbein, and Aldegrever, were not only esteemed as ornaments in glass paintings and woodcuts, but were also employed in plastic art, as for example, in embossed works on cups. A further consequence of the general pictorial character of the epoch,

as seen in the works of the goldsmith, is the interruption of the structure of their vessels by independent ornaments. Pictures in relief, medallions, panels with representations from mythology, history and every day life, were introduced between the parts of the vessels, and contributed more and more to efface the architectonic character of the whole. On the other hand the naturalistic element became almost exclusively a mere toy, imitating the shape of the natural fruit, as in the so-called grape-cups of the seventeenth century, or placing an enamelled nosegay as the ornament of the cover to the cup, not to mention those drinking cups which came more and more into favour in the shape of birds, dogs, stags, nay even

of human beings, like that of the lady in a hooped petticoat holding a bowl with both hands over her head, so as to form a double cup.

With such figures the German Renaissance degenerates into the wild Rococo epoch, in which it loses more and more its architectonic character. We have endeavoured to point out above the causes and precursors of this phenomenon, with the intention of demonstrating in some degree the essence and historical development of this style of goldsmith's work, and principally to notice the manner of its derivation from preceding styles, and the circumstances which both promoted and hindered its development.

SPECIMENS OF ORNAMENTATION.



No. 1. From Cairo. Arabian Ornament from Mosque of Sultan Hassan; $\frac{1}{6}$ real size.